

Italian American Stregheria and Wicca: Ethnic Ambivalence in American Neopaganism

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Italian American Witchcraft, or *Stregheria*, is one of a number of ethnic varieties of Neopagan Witchcraft to have emerged in the United States during the late 20th century. Like other forms of revival Witchcraft, Stregheria is based on the premise that witchcraft was an ancient pre-Christian religion based on the natural cycle of the seasons and the worship of a goddess, that survived in the folklore of European peasants. Streghe (practitioners of Stregheria; the singular form is *Strega*) see the natural world as sacred, divinity as immanent in nature, and the cycles of nature as metaphors for spiritual processes. The structure of Stregheria is similar to that of Wicca and its derivative variants: members worship in small groups led by a priestess and priest; the divine is perceived as having both feminine and masculine aspects; worship is centered on ecstatic union with the deities; magic is a fundamental part of worship; and meetings take place on full moons, solstices, equinoxes and cross-quarter days -- the days that fall roughly between each solstice and equinox. The unique practices of Streghe that distinguish them from other Neopagan Witches will be described in greater detail below.

In this essay, "Neopagan" refers to any of a number of modern religions that draw inspiration from pre-Christian forms of worship. Many practitioners of these religions prefer to call themselves "Pagan," eliding the distinctions between ancient religions and their modern revivals; some believe that the prefix "neo" invalidates revival Paganism and other new religions. As this article will demonstrate, however, revival and reclamation are integral to the process of tradition itself, and are often responsible for the

preservation of materials that would otherwise be lost. Distinguishing between pre-Christian paganisms and their modern revivals is not meant to de-legitimize Neopaganism, but to draw attention to the process of revival itself, which is clearly observable in the case of Italian American Witchcraft. “Neopagan” and “Pagan” will be used interchangeably in this essay to refer to the modern movements; “pagan” will be used to indicate historical religions. In the same vein, “Witchcraft” will denote Neopagan revival Witchcraft, while “witch,” “witchcraft” and “strega” indicate folkloric, historical or anthropological concepts. “Wicca” in this essay refers only to British traditional Craft as presented by Gerald B. Gardner and his followers.

The roots of Stregheria are entwined with those of Wicca, the first form of Neopagan Witchcraft to be described in print by Gerald Gardner *Witchcraft Today* (1954). While Gardnerian Wicca served as a template for all other varieties of the religion, one of Wicca’s most important sources was also central to the development of Stregheria. *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1889), the work of amateur folklorist Charles G. Leland, is a collection of spells, rhymes and legends which Leland claimed to have collected from a Florentine fortune-teller whom he called “Maddalena.” According to Leland, Maddalena belonged to a family of witches who practiced a form of pagan religion centered on the worship of the moon goddess Diana and her consort, Lucifer. Lucifer, whose name means “bearer of light,” is not the conventional Christian devil in this narrative, but both the brother and lover of Diana. Together, they have a daughter, Aradia, who descends to earth to teach the peasants to resist the tyranny of their oppressors through sorcery. Through Aradia, Diana instructs the witches to gather in the woods when the moon is full and hold a witches’ supper of moon-shaped cakes made of

meal, salt and honey. There, they feast, sing, and, as a sign that they are free from the restrictions of social class, dance naked in the worship of Diana.

The *Gospel of the Witches* also contains a number of spells used to summon Diana's help. Many of these aim to dispel bad luck or the evil eye, or to bring good luck in special enterprises. In tone, these spells emphasize a clientilistic relationship between Diana and her followers: the deity is threatened if she does not help fulfill the supplicant's prayers. While this relationship may be shocking to contemporary Pagans, who prefer a bond of equality and collaboration between worshippers and their deities, it is not out of character for 19th century Italian peasants. It reproduces the character of many social relationships of the time between wealthy and powerful individuals and their poorer clients. Similar types of relationships can be found today in rural Italy between Catholics and local saints, who may be venerated when things are good and threatened or punished when they do not deliver what their devotees want or expect. For example, in rural Sardinia, statues of the local saint may be brought out of the church at the end of the dry season, where locals pray to them to bring much-needed rains. If enough time goes by without any rain, though, villagers may get angry and decide to punish the recalcitrant saint by putting the statue upside down in a well.

Leland interpreted the spells and the legends he collected according to popular folklore theories of the late 19th century: as survivals of the pagan religion of the ancient Romans or the Etruscans, a people whose civilization dominated central Italy before the rise of Rome. According to his claims, late 19th century Italian witches continued to practice this form of paganism, which he dubbed *la vecchia religione* (the old religion). Leland's work provoked controversy from the time of its publication. Because nothing

quite like it has ever been documented by Italian ethnologists, it was widely believed to be a fake. Leland was suspected of having invented it himself, and some even supposed that Maddalena was another of Leland's fabrications. Those who were willing to accept her existence believed that she had concocted material to satisfy her patron's peculiar interests and tastes, as Leland never hid the fact that he paid her for information.

Historian Robert Mathiesen has discovered evidence that Maddalena was a pseudonym for a real woman, a Florentine courtesan and popular psychic whom Leland frequented during his stay in Florence in the late 1890's (Mathiesen, 1998). He proposes that *Aradia* be interpreted as a dialogic and intersubjective text – a product of the close interaction between Leland and Maddalena, during which Maddalena selected and re-interpreted the parts of her folklore that most interested her wealthy patron in ways she knew would keep him spellbound. The result was a document that incorporated many elements of folklore, but strung them together in unusual ways, giving them a unique and atypical interpretation.

Despite the controversies surrounding it, Leland's *Aradia* remains one of the most important texts of the witchcraft revival movement. Its contributions to modern Neopagan Witchcraft include specific practices (full moon meetings, the goddess name of Aradia; the practice of naked worship, adopted by Gardnerian and other British traditional Craft; and the Charge of the Goddess, later rewritten by Doreen Valiente), as well as the concept of witchcraft as a form of peasant resistance and cultural critique.

For Italian American Neopagans, the most important contribution of Leland's *Aradia* is its location of an ancient goddess-worshipping religion in the heart of Italy. Its inclusion of a number of items of folklore drawn directly from the Italian tradition – for

example, spells against the evil eye, the blessing of the flour before making bread, and children's rhymes – allowed Italian Americans who read it to interpret their own family traditions as part of an ancient pagan religion, a form of goddess worship and a tactic of resistance against church and state oppression. As Neopagan Witchcraft diffused throughout North America during the 1960s and 70s, Italian Americans began to reclaim and rework Leland's material.

One of the first authors to openly identify as an Italian American Witch was Leo Louis Martello (1932?–2000). A first-generation Sicilian American, he wrote several esoteric books -- *Weird Ways of Witchcraft* (1972), *Black Magic, Satanism and Voodoo* (1973), and *Witchcraft, the Old Religion* (1975) -- in which he recounted how he was initiated into a family tradition of witchcraft upon reaching puberty, and sworn to secrecy by means of a blood oath. While the secret nature of his family magical practice made it impossible for him to reveal all its characteristics, he described it as a remnant of Sicily's cult of Demeter and Persephone, preserved under the guise of Marian worship in the Catholic Church. In fact, he claimed that Sicilian families concealed their pagan religion under the guise of devotion to the Virgin Mary, whom they interpreted as simply another version of the goddess Demeter. Martello portrayed a number of Italian folk traditions as traditions specific to witches. For example, he maintained that the *mano fica* gesture, in which the thumb is held between the first and second fingers in a fist, was used by witches to turn away evil spells. In this interesting interpretation of popular tradition, a gesture widely used to avert witchcraft and the evil eye is interpreted as a form of magic unique to Italian witch families. Italian Americans reading Martello could easily be led

to believe that the presence of the gesture in their family folklore was evidence of their belonging to an ancient pagan religion – *la vecchia religione*.

Martello drew a number of motifs from Italian folklore and popular culture into his narrative, weaving a web that tied together elements from different Italian regions and historical periods. He cited historian Carlo Ginzburg's research on the *benandanti*, a group of 17th century Friulian peasants who told inquisitors they traveled at night in spirit to fight evil witches over the fertility of the crops. He presented legends about Neapolitan witches, known as *janare*, who gathered around the walnut tree at Benevento for their sabbat frolics, connecting them with reports about the continuing worship of Diana through the linguistic link between "Diana" and the Neapolitan dialect word *janara*. Perhaps his most surprising claim was his assertion that the Mafia was linked to the Old Religion. He explained the origin of the word *mafia* as a combination of the Latin words *mater* (mother) and *filia* (daughter) or *fidelitas* (faith) – "mother and daughter" (Demeter and Persephone) or "mother faith" (i.e. goddess worship). Martello's description of his family's magical tradition as linked with secrecy, blood oaths, honor and vendetta drew heavily on popular stereotypes of Italian organized crime, perhaps in an attempt to reclaim and re-value this negative stereotype by linking it to a positive tradition of peasant resistance and goddess worship.

Martello's work influenced a number of other Italian American spiritual practitioners, among them Lori Bruno, who grew up in a New York Italian neighborhood in the 1940s and 50s. Bruno believes she is descended from relatives of apostate monk Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake for heresy in 1600, and counts among her ancestors a healer executed in Catania for lancing the swellings of patients afflicted with bubonic

plague. Bruno's mother and grandmother practiced midwifery, herbal healing, the removal of the evil eye, the cutting away of illness using a special knife, and divination. As in many Italian families, healing prayers and techniques were secret, and transmitted only to other family members. When Lori came of age, she inherited the tradition from her mother and grandmother. Her tradition seems to involve a form of trance or altered consciousness during which the healer communicates directly with spirits or deities. She explained, "My parents told me, 'When you need to leave [your body], it will happen.' And when they touch us, we feel them with a warmth that fills your whole body. And we walk with them – we walk with the gods." She describes how she healed her own grandchild, who was born with a heart defect, by calling on Apollo, the Greek god of healing, and Asclepius, the ancient Greek physician.

Martello and Bruno co-founded the earliest known Italian American coven in the United States: the Trinacrian Rose coven of New York City. In this group, Wiccan traditions are given an Italian flavor through the use of Mediterranean deities and sabbat names. Membership is not limited to Italian Americans; according to Bruno, ethnicity is not important in determining membership. "I cannot make a Strega," she said. "Do you know who makes the Strega? It is the gods and goddesses – the hand that touches you that causes the quickening, that wakes your memories of a different life." So while individuals of any ancestry can be initiated into the Trinacrian Rose after an appropriate period of study, Bruno maintains the Old World belief that a certain part of magical ability is inborn.

While Martello and Bruno were key figures in the development of an Italian American Witchcraft, the creator of what today is called Stregheria is Raven Grimassi.

Grimassi's father was American (Grimassi is a pen name); his mother came from the region of Campania, outside Naples. She belonged to a family whose members practiced a number of magical traditions, including the removal of the evil eye, the making of medicinal liqueurs and oils, and divination. She was also a teller of tales and legends, some of which she passed on to her son. In one folktale, the moon is impregnated by her lover the morning star, whose name in this story is *Lucino* or *Lucifero*, recalling Leland's tale of the moon goddess and her lover, Lucifer. Grimassi was also close to his mother's sister, another active bearer of the family healing tradition; this aunt initiated him into the tradition when he reached adolescence. Like the traditions described by Martello, Bruno and a number of Italian ethnologists, it consisted of a set of secret teachings limited to family members, passed on only to those who were felt to have some innate magical ability and interest. But it is not this tradition that Grimassi writes about in his works *The Ways of the Strega* (1995), *Hereditary Witchcraft* (1999), and *Italian Witchcraft* (2000), all published by Llewellyn, a popular New Age publisher. Instead, he presents a religion similar to Wicca in structure and practice, with Italian flavor added through the names of deities, spirits, and sabbats. One early commentator jokingly called it "Wicca a la Florentine." Stregheria is allegedly based on the teachings of Aradia, who, according to Grimassi's expansion of Leland's legend, was born in Volterra, Italy sometime during the 13th century. She was raised by a family of Witches and began to spread her gospel of peasant resistance through the practice of the Old Religion. He presents Italian Witchcraft as divided into three clans: the *Fanarra* of northern Italy, and the *Janarra* and *Tanarra* of central Italy. No mention is made of southern Italy, despite the fact that the majority of Italian immigrants to North America, including Grimassi's mother, originated

there. Grimassi explains this tripartite structure as the result of the travels of Aradia's twelve disciples, who, after her disappearance, dispersed into groups to spread her teachings through Italy. Each tradition is directed by a leader known as a *Grimas*. Like the names of the three Strega clans, the word "Grimas" does not occur in Italian or in any of its dialects.

A number of factors impinge upon his decision not to reveal family folk practices in his writings. In part, it is out of respect for his promise not to reveal the secrets of the tradition outside the family. This is reinforced by a belief that once a person passes on magical knowledge, his or her own healing powers are lost. Yet on another level, Grimassi wants to preserve his family's magical tradition and share it with the world. Nevertheless, he is also aware that many aspects of what was a rural peasant system of practice and belief do not translate well into the lives of 21st century Americans. For example, he described a cure that involves a classic instance of contagious magic, or the idea that qualities can be transferred from one object to another merely by touch. To cure illness, rub the body all over with a piece of animal fat or lard; then, discard the fat by throwing it into the ocean or burying it. The illness, which has been magically "transferred" to the fat, will disappear. But he pointed out that modern Neopagans "are grossed out by this.... They'd say, 'I'm vegan; can I use broccoli instead? Can I use tofu?'" The idea of rubbing raw meat or fat all over the body is not part of the ethos of contemporary Neopagans, for whom belief in the sacredness of nature extends to all life forms, and can lead to becoming vegetarian. Other aspects of his family tradition involve music and dance steps which are only incompletely remembered, or practices that are deeply grounded in agricultural life and cannot be replicated by urban and suburban

dwellers. Rather than risk revealing a tradition which, out of context, makes little sense and might easily be misunderstood, Grimassi has chosen instead to elaborate on certain aspects of his tradition using existing Neopagan and Wiccan sources, such as Leland and Gardner, as well as scholarship on Italian folklore, to reconstruct the missing historical and ethnographic background. When he cannot reconstruct, he creates new traditions to replace what has been lost or cannot be revealed.

Stregheria contains certain elements that bear some relation to Italian folk customs; for example, in *The Ways of the Strega* and *Hereditary Witchcraft*, Grimassi gives examples of prayers to St. Anthony to retrieve lost objects, to St. Peter and St. Blaise to bless a holy stone as a talisman; and to various saints to cure the evil eye. His “Nanta Bag,” a small pouch containing sacred objects worn around the neck with a cord, is similar to the Italian tradition of *brevi*, tiny bags containing herbs and sacred images worn on the body for protection which can be traced to ancient Roman practice. He describes divination by reading the shapes made by olive oil dropped into a plate of water, as well as by the use of cards. These practices are widespread in rural Italy, and have many analogues in collections of Italian and Italian American folklore. However, the framework into which these practices are inserted is that of Neopagan Witchcraft.

Other aspects of Stregheria are culled from historical and ethnographic sources. Leland’s *Aradia* is the inspiration for many aspects of the religion, from the focus on Diana and her consort to the name of the prophet herself. Because of Leland’s fascination with Etruria, and his tendency to postulate an Etruscan source for almost any non-Roman element in the folklore he collected, Grimassi’s Stregheria is also heavy on Etruscan elements. He borrows from Leland’s *Etruscan Roman Remains* (1892) the

Etruscan names of the deities (Uni and Tagni) and the emphasis on ancestor spirits, or *lasa*. He uses the Etruscan alphabet as a secret, magical system of Strega writing, to which he adds a number of glyphs of his own invention. The work of historian Carlo Ginzburg on both the *benandanti*, a 16th and 17th century Friulian agrarian cult, and the legends of the Society of Diana, groups of women who traveled in spirit under the protection of a supernatural female leader, variously called Diana, Herodias, and many other names, are interpreted as evidence of the widespread existence of Stregheria in medieval and early modern Italy. Many elements of contemporary Italian folklore, such as the Befana, a good witch who brings children gifts on January 6, are re-interpreted in Grimassi's books as part of the Strega tradition. From folklorist Alessandro Falassi's *Folklore by the Fireside* (1980), Grimassi borrows the concept of the *veglia*, or evening gathering during which various genres of folklore are performed; he presents it as a practice unique to witch families. He even adapts spells from contemporary collections of Italian American folklore, reinterpreting them as unique Strega practices.

Grimassi never claims to be reproducing exactly what was practiced in Italy. His genius is creative, rather than scholarly: he admits that Streghe have “adapted a few Wiccan elements into their ways” (1995:xviii) and acknowledges he is expanding on his own family tradition, adding elements to it to restore it to what he imagines was its original state. But from his attempts to restore a tradition, a brand new tradition has emerged – one that bears little resemblance to anything that was practiced in Italy or in Italian American ethnic communities.

In form and structure, Stregheria is similar to Wicca and other traditions of revival Witchcraft. The basic unit of worship is the *boschetto* (grove), a small group led by a

priestess and priest. Streghe worship a goddess and god, variously called Diana and Dianus, Uni and Tagni, Tana and Tanus, Fana and Fanus, or Jana and Janus, and interpreted as versions of the moon goddess and her brother/consort as described by Leland. The ancestor spirits, called *lares* or *lasa*, also figure prominently in this tradition, and are honored during the October 31 sabbat, *la festa dell'ombra* (the feast of the shadow). The other eight sabbats also follow the Wiccan year cycle, and include *la festa dell'inverno* (the winter feast, December 21), *la festa di Lupercus* (the feast of Lupercus, February 2), *l'equinozio della primavera* (the spring equinox, March 21), *la giornata di Diana* (Diana's day, May 1), *la festa dell'estate* (the summer feast, June 21), and *l'equinozio d'autunno* (the fall equinox, September 21). Some of these sabbats have a slightly different emphasis in Stregheria than in mainline Wicca: for instance, while many Wiccans honor the goddess Brigid on February 2, Streghe dedicate this feast to Lupercus, whom the ancient Romans celebrated in February during the Lupercalia, a festival of purification. And May 1 in Stregheria is dedicated to the goddess Diana, while many Wiccans celebrate the union of the goddess and the god on this sabbat, to which they give the Irish name of Beltaine. Like Wiccans, Streghe also observe the new and full moons, and have special rites for initiations, weddings, child blessings and funerals. These rituals are similar to those of revival Witchcraft in its various forms: worship takes place in a circle, which is consecrated at the beginning of the ritual; Streghe invoke the deities and protectors of the four directions (whom they call *Grigori*); their main goal is to achieve union with the divine through a variety of techniques to shift consciousness; and they generally end with a shared feast of cakes and wine. In addition to worshipping

a goddess and god, many Streghe also recognize the existence of other spirits, such as *silvani*, *linchetti* and *folletti*, similar to fairies in Italian folk tradition.

Because Stregheria contains some elements of folklore that are part of the Italian American experience, it is relatively easy for Italian Americans to interpret ethnic folk practices as signs that their family preserved an ancient pre-Christian religion. An individual whose family preserved gestures or charms against the evil eye, for example, might conclude from Grimassi's writings that the family practiced some form of Stregheria. Even overtly Catholic elements are re-interpreted in this way. In an interview, Grimassi told me his family had a *lararium*, a shrine to the ancestors in the tradition of the Roman practice of ancestor worship. When I asked him for further details, he described a shelf where photographs of dead relatives were displayed, along with an image of the Virgin Mary. There, his mother would light candles and occasionally leave a small vase of flowers. This display is typical of many Italian and Italian American homes; but very few practitioners would interpret it as a form of ancestor worship. Most see it as a way to maintain an emotional link with their dearly departed within a larger framework of Catholic worship, where the souls of the dead are entrusted to God, the Virgin Mary and the saints, and relatives offer prayers for their salvation. Modern Streghe, in contrast, interpret folk practices in their families as signs that they are heirs to an ancient pre-Christian Mediterranean religion. The overtly Christian elements are explained as a cover that allowed paganism to persist in the face of Christianity; they are erased to unearth the underlying "original," pagan forms.

Fabrisia, a hereditary Strega who maintains a website on her religion, describes her grandmother's practices:

My grandmother Adelina ... had the “obligatory” Catholic statues. I remember [she] had a wonderful herb garden, and on one side of it was a statue of the Virgin Mary. When she cut herbs or worked in the garden, she always turned the statue away from her work.... I remember [her] working potions and charms, always *in Italiano*, so I only got bits and pieces of what [she] was doing. When my grandmother passed over in 1963, there was no Catholic “thing,” only a simple ritual at her home. Her athame [ritual knife] was buried with her along with a variety of stones to “help her on the way.” She was buried in the cemetery and flowers were strewn over her grave. I was only eight years old and “knew” this was different [email letter to the author, July 2000].

The practices Fabrisia describes here are very much in keeping with an Italian peasant tradition. They are not the complex ritual worship of Wiccans, but the growing of herbs, the making of curative liqueurs and the recitation of healing prayers and charms. She now sees these as conscious acts of resistance and preservation, under the guise of conforming to appearances of Catholicism. She elaborates further in the story of her grandfather:

My grandfather Primo was a caretaker at a Catholic church. What a way to stay hidden. Primo’s father Luigi was also a caretaker at this same church. Luigi’s brother Salvatore was a priest and worked closely with many popes.... According to family “tales,” many who attended this church were of The Ways [practiced a pagan religion]. Since my dad won’t discuss this, I am at a loss to know for sure [email letter to the author, July 2000].

Here, her family’s religious activities are interpreted as paganism hiding under the very noses of Catholic clergy, including the Pope himself. While she first says that according to family stories, her relatives practiced a pagan religion, she later adds that her father refuses to discuss it with her. Fabrisia interprets his silence as evidence of her family’s involvement with *la vecchia religione*.

While Streghe have a tendency to interpret the presence of any folk elements in their family’s heritage as evidence that they have preserved an ancient pagan religion, folklorists, anthropologists and historians see Stregheria as an example of invented

tradition. This concept, coined by historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983), referred originally to traditions developed by would-be European nations during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a period of great social change and nation-building in the West, as part of the process of state formation. Anthropologists and folklorists adapted the concept, applying it to other groups that develop or adapt customs in an attempt to create identities for themselves, usually in contrast to a dominant culture. Scholars understand the revival, revitalization and invention of new traditions as an integral part of the process of tradition. In the case of ethnic groups living within a majority culture, it is part of the process of identity creation and maintenance which characterizes globalizing multicultural societies. Thus, Stregheria should not be interpreted as an inauthentic religion or an attempt to market “fakelore,” but as part of the process through which ethnic groups reinterpret and reclaim memory, ultimately maintaining traditions. The construction of ethnic identity, and its interpretation of memory, can vary greatly from one individual to the next, and from one generation to another. Stregheria is simply one of the latest iterations of this expression among Italian Americans.

While they now recognize that authenticity is always culturally constructed, scholars distinguish between invented and reclaimed traditions, on one hand, and those that are clearly linked to Old World practices and worldviews. Ethnic studies scholar Robert Klymasz identified three layers of folklore present in each ethnic community: the traditional, which has changed little from its old country form; the transitional, in which some old elements are crystallizing, while others are disappearing and being replaced by new adaptations; and the innovational, which often revives or replaces forms that have been forgotten, or that never existed in the first place (Klymasz, 1973). The development

of innovational folklore is part of the process of ethnic adaptation, acculturation and identity creation, and is common to nearly all ethnic groups. While the existence of family healing traditions among Italian Americans belongs to the traditional layer, Stregheria as a Neopagan religion is clearly innovational.

Historical Roots

Despite its status as an invented tradition, Stregheria has roots in the history and folklore of Italy. The word *strega*, meaning “witch,” comes from the Latin word *strix*, which referred both to witches and the owls they were believed to change into on their night flights. There is ample evidence that the ancient Romans both believed in and practiced sorcery, and the goddess Diana, along with her counterpart Hecate, was thought to preside over their activities. The poet Horace, writing about the witch Canidia, has her invoke “night and Diana, ye faithful witnesses of all my enterprises” (Horace, Epode 5, vv. 49-54). One form of Roman sorcery consisted of making *defixionum tabellae*, lead tablets inscribed with the names of enemies sorcerers wished to entrust to the gods of the otherworld in order to ensure their demise. These tablets were pierced with nails and thrown into wells and ditches, where today’s archeologists sometimes discover them. Spells that curse enemies by piercing objects with nails or pins could still be collected in Italy in the late 19th and early 20th century. Leland’s “Conjuration of Lemon and Pins” (Leland, 1899:29-32) is typical of these, and similar to one collected in Sicily by the great Italian folklore collector Giuseppe Pitré: to make an enemy fall ill, take a lemon or an orange to midnight mass on Christmas Eve. At the moment of the Eucharist, pierce it with pins while reciting the following curse: “As many pins as I stick in this orange, may

so many ills befall you.” The fruit is then thrown into a well or cistern (Pitré, cited by Di Nola, 1993:49; translation by the author).

It was not only witches who worshipped Diana in ancient times. Because she was the patroness of childbirth, she was also venerated by women, who would gather around the lake of Nemi on the calends of August to celebrate a festival in her honor. Since the rites of Diana were women’s mysteries, and closed to outsiders, no written record has survived of their activities there, but archeologists have found many votive offerings in the area: figures shaped like uteri and statuettes of mother and child, tablets beseeching the goddess’s aid, and statuettes of horned stags representing Actaeon, the youth whose lust Diana punished by transforming him into a stag are part of the archeological record. These objects leave tantalizing clues to what might have been a predecessor of today’s Neopagan religions.

It is not clear how long the mysteries of Diana continued to be practiced in Italy after the advent of Christianity, but during the Middle Ages, the name of the goddess resurfaced, this time in the encyclicals of clerics, where it is joined with the name of Herodias, one of the wickedest women in the New Testament, and a possible linguistic source for the name Aradia. Between the 9th and the 12th centuries CE, numerous writings by Church officials lamented popular beliefs in legends about “Diana, the pagan goddess, or Herodias,” whom some women claimed to follow on nightly spiritual journeys (Bonomo, 1959:18). According to the 9th century *Canon Episcopi*, the most famous of these documents, some women professed to ride out at night on the backs of animals, following their mistress Herodias or Diana, who called them to service

periodically (Caro Baroja, 1961:62). But who was Herodias, and what was her connection to Diana?

Herodias first appears in the Gospel of Matthew as the wife of King Herod's brother. She developed such a dislike for John the Baptist that she insisted Herod arrest him when he came into his kingdom, and she persuaded her daughter, Salome, to dance for Herod and then ask for the head of the prophet in return for her favors (Matthew 14:3-12). According to an early Christian legend, when Salome saw the head of John the Baptist brought before her on a platter, she was seized with remorse, and began to wail and regret her sinful request. Then a powerful wind issued from the saint's mouth, so strong that it blew the wicked dancer into the air, where she is condemned to wander forever as punishment (Cattabiani, 1994:208). Since in Roman usage, the women of a household were commonly known by the name of the male head of the household, it is easy to see how Salome and her mother Herodias might have merged in popular legend, until it became Herodias who flew through the air on nightly journeys. In Italian, Herodias is known as *Erodiade*, which is linguistically similar to Aradia. Leland, in fact, equated the two in the *Gospel of the Witches*. Herodias may have become linked with Diana through a third character, the goddess Hecate, with whom Diana was often conflated. Hecate ruled over the underworld, and was said to ride at the head of the procession of the unquiet dead on their nightly raids. Like Diana, Hecate protected witches and sorcerers in their magical work, and was most active at night. Through the common motif of nightly flights, the figures of Hecate/Diana and Herodias became linked during late antiquity or the early medieval period, and additional motifs became a part of the emerging legend complex: the practice of witchcraft, a connection with the moon, the

presence of other spirits (e.g. spirits of the dead), and gatherings of women that included feasting, dancing and sexual license. It was these legends that disturbed the Christian clerics in the 9th and 10th centuries, and which became part of a growing body of folklore in the area of northern Italy, southern Germany and the western Balkans.

The view of the *Canon Episcopi* was that the legends of Diana and Herodias were false, and that women who believed they rode out with these figures were deluded and in need of religious education. But over the next two centuries, this point of view slowly changed, until by the 12th century, writers began to portray the night-time journeys as though they had actually occurred. As the Inquisition grew stronger, women were arrested for claiming that they had ridden out with Diana, Herodias, and other supernatural women whose names varied according to region and dialect. In a series of trials in Milan during the late 1300's, several women, most of them folk healers of some sort, confessed to going out at night to the "games of Erodiade." The gatherings would slaughter and feast on livestock, which Erodiade, the leader of the assembly, would magically bring back to life at the end of the evening. They would visit the homes of the wealthy, where they would eat and drink as much as they wished; these provisions too would magically regenerate by morning. The assembly blessed homes that were clean and neat. The leader would instruct her followers in healing and divination techniques, and answer their questions about illnesses and thefts. But all the assembled were sworn to secrecy. To attend the gathering, Pierina de Bugatis, one of the accused, would summon a spirit called "Lucifelus," who appeared in the form of a man to take her.

These tales puzzled the judges who presided over the trials. In the early phases, the accused were imprisoned for having believed and repeated false stories; but by the late

1390's, popular opinion had shifted, and the accused were executed for having actually participated in the assemblies, an act the judges considered heretical. It is unclear whether anything like the night-time assemblies and feasts ever took place in reality. Many of the experiences of the accused suggest events that could only have taken place in dreams, fantasies or trance states: the night flights, magically regenerating livestock and the granting of wishes are clearly fantastic in nature. Other features of the assemblies, however, suggest that some aspects could have really taken place. All of the accused who reported these tales were folk healers and diviners. The tales are remarkably similar, and were not obtained under torture. A key function of the night-time assemblies was obtaining answers to divinatory questions and information about healing. These features are very similar to those of other belief systems involving healing, spiritual journeys, and supernatural beings from the area around the Mediterranean, including Greece, North Africa, southern Italy and Sardinia, and the Balkans. In many of these examples, ethnographers have documented the existence of healing societies that convened in the flesh to play music, dance ecstatically and perform healing ceremonies (De Martino, 1961; Gallini, 1988). In other cases, the societies existed only in spirit, and included spiritual members such as fairies, *jinn* or *iele* (Hennigsen, 1993; Crapanzano, 1975; Kligman, 1981). But each of these cases involved complex belief systems where healers cured illnesses caused by spiritual beings by communing on some level with the spirits themselves. It is not impossible to imagine that the accused in the Milan trials may have belonged to a similar kind of society of folk healers.

In 16th century Friuli, another example of pagan material surfaced through the witch trials. Historian Carlo Ginzburg studied trial records in which numerous men

claimed to be *benandanti*, literally “good walkers,” who traveled at night in spirit to fight against the *stregoni* (wizards) for the fertility of the crops. Once again, the judges in these cases were mystified by the strange reports, and tried to make them fit into what by then had become the standard template of diabolical witchcraft: the witches’ sabbat, consisting of a Black Mass (a parody of the Catholic mass), acts of cannibalism and sexual perversion, and a pact of allegiance to the devil (Ginzburg, 1966). This case demonstrates how material from the dominant discourse – in this case, the subversion myth of diabolical witchcraft that had developed among the European elites in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries – imposed itself on the folk belief systems of common people, erasing the native interpretation and forcing its own onto the narratives, despite the rather poor fit. It also shows that for early modern Italian peasants, a witch – a *strega* – was a wholly negative figure, linked, by then, with the Christian devil and the myth of the diabolical pact. Both sets of trials illustrate that pre-Christian beliefs existed in Italy well into the medieval and early modern period. But in neither of these cases were the accused describing the survival of a pagan religion as cultural system. Rather, bits and pieces of earlier belief systems merged with other elements of folklore and acquired a Christian veneer.

But could an ancient pre-Christian religion involving the veneration of Diana have survived in Italian peasant tradition, only to be brought to North America by Italian immigrants? The lack of written evidence makes any answer to this question hypothetical at best, but from the historical record, such a scenario would be very unlikely. Three factors make the survival of a pagan religion in Italy into the 20th century, and its transmission through written documents such as Leland’s *Aradia*,

improbable: the strong presence of Christianity throughout the peninsula from fairly early after the fall of the Roman Empire; the lack of a unified Italian culture and language until the late 19th century; and the relative isolation and lack of resources of the peasant classes – the very ones who are said to have preserved the religion, according to the Neopagan mythos.

Because Italy was at the very heart of the Roman Empire, Christianity spread quickly after the Emperor Constantine's conversion in 415 CE, and thoroughly penetrated every part of the peninsula. In fact, during a long era of separation, it can be argued that Christianity was the single most powerful unifying force in the Italian peninsula. This is not to say, however, that pre-Christian beliefs and magical practices did not persist, because they clearly did – some well into the 20th century. However, these practices were inserted into a Christianized context, with saints taking the place of earlier goddesses and gods and Christian prayers substituting for pagan charms and spells. A clear example of this involves the use of moon-shaped charms to cure epilepsy. This neurological illness was thought to be a gift or curse from the gods in the ancient world, and was believed to be linked to the phases of the moon. Ancient amulets against epilepsy survive in the archeological record; these depict a crescent moon and the goddess Diana, sometimes accompanied by a frog, which was also a lunar symbol. Similar amulets featuring the crescent moon and the figure of a male saint exist going back to the 18th century. These charms, also said to protect the wearer against epilepsy, are dedicated to St. Valentine in the north of Italy and St. Donato in the south. In this case, the *form* of the amulet (crescent moon + powerful supernatural figure) has remained the same, as has the *belief* in its efficacy (wear this and the powerful supernatural will keep epilepsy away); but the

nature of the supernatural being and the *context* in which the amulet and the belief exist has changed from a pagan one to a Christian one. Italians wearing an amulet of St. Donato or St. Valentine would not perceive themselves as worshippers of Diana, but as good Christians turning to the saints for protection.

What of claims that some families hid their practice of the old pagan religion under the very noses of the Catholic clergy? This interpretation may result from an oversimplification of the complex relationship between official and folk Catholicism in Italy. Despite the Church's strong historical presence in the peninsula (or perhaps because of it), Italians have traditionally had mixed feelings about it. The Church was often allied with the elite classes and the state; this caused many non-elites to be suspicious of its motives, and to see it as complicit in their economic and cultural oppression. Too, the ethos of male dominance present throughout the Mediterranean led many men to regard priests, who were allegedly celibate, with distrust; they were suspected of seducing women and corrupting boys, and were portrayed thus in countless stories, rhymes, and songs. Especially in rural areas, people practiced folk Catholicism, a mixture of some pre-Christian elements with an overlay of Christianity. They remained relatively ignorant of official dogma and doctrine, aspects which until after the Second Vatican Council in 1962 were communicated in Latin, a language the common people did not understand. Yet historically, the Church frowned upon folk religious practices and attempted to discourage them, often labeling them as pagan because of their historical links to an earlier magical worldview. Those who engaged in folk religious practices, such as the removal of the evil eye, would be strongly motivated to hide them from the clergy. This did not mean, however, that they actually practiced a pagan religion. In

fact, the very villagers who practiced folk healing were often also deeply involved in religious fraternities and sororities, the maintenance of saint's shrines, and the organization of celebrations surrounding saint's days. They saw no contradiction between their involvement with the more formal aspects of Catholicism and their magical practices, since they both involved the veneration of a saint.

The history of Italy in the post-Roman period also makes the diffusion of Grimassi's Stregheria, or a religion resembling it, unlikely at best. Between 500 CE and 1861, Italy consisted of a patchwork of kingdoms, principalities, city-states and papal lands. While originally united under the Roman Empire, by the 14th century – the time when Grimassi claims that the prophetess Aradia arrived – Italy was divided by language and custom, as well as by political boundaries. Free movement from one region to another would have been difficult, especially for common people and peasants, who lived under a feudal system. Moreover, dialectical differences further divided the regions from one another, making communication challenging. Even at the time of Italian unification in the late 19th century, the dialects of the various regions were not mutually intelligible, and it was impossible for people from, say, Friuli in the northeast to understand Sicilians in the south. These dialectical differences persist to this day; it is only the influence of the mass media, with its equalizing effect on dialects and pronunciations, and the national system of public education, with its emphasis on teaching standard Italian, that has eroded these distinctions in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. So while pre-Christian elements persisted in folklore well into the 20th century, they did not form a part of a unified, homogenous religious system, but differed considerably in both dialect and form according to region.

Finally, until the years following World War II, the majority of Italy's population was rural and agricultural. Most families lived in small villages and towns; there was little access to education outside the elite classes, and instruction was controlled by the Catholic Church. *Contadini* (peasants) were illiterate, and relied on oral tradition to maintain their way of life. Texts such as Leland's *Gospel of the Witches* could not have been transmitted, and Aradia's teachings, if they had existed, would not have been written down. These factors make it improbable that a pre-Christian religion survived as an intact system throughout Italy into the 20th century.

Folk Traditions in the New World

Nevertheless, Italy has a rich body of folk beliefs and practices which anthropologists and folklorists have documented in the last 100 years. Some of these were brought to North America by Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and many survived in the families of contemporary North American Neopagans, who now interpret them as evidence of the survival of an ancient pagan religion.

By far the majority of Italian immigrants to North America in the period between 1890 and 1950 were *contadini* (peasants) from the south of Italy, a region economically devastated by continuing exploitation and governmental neglect. They brought with them a folk religiosity which was nominally Catholic, but had little to do with the official Church dogma and doctrine. It was instead "a syncretic melding of ancient pagan beliefs, magical practices, and Christian liturgy" (Vecoli, 1977:26). Their universe was animated by a variety of spirits, including angels, saints and demons, but also local spirits who could be invoked to help with survival, but were also not to be fully trusted. Religious devotion was often focused on the patron saint, especially the patronal festival, whose

secular, celebratory aspects, untouched by the Protestant Reformation, included expressions of passion and ecstasy through which worshippers experienced direct contact with the sacred. The immigrants also brought with them a rich tradition of folk magic, especially a pervasive belief in *il malocchio* (the evil eye). It was believed to be the cause of many physical and social ills, and the immigrants had at their disposal an arsenal of amulets and cures to protect against it. Most rural communities had folk healers whose craft was learned in the family. They practiced a range of therapeutic techniques, from the preparation of herbal infusions and philters, to the use of prayers and charms, to family-based practices of divination that employed altered states of consciousness. While villagers and immigrants alike relied on the craft of the healers, they were also sometimes suspected of casting injurious spells.

These healers were not to be confused with *streghe*, or witches, individuals believed to have an inborn ability to cause harm. Italians had many legends about these beings, who performed feats that were obviously supernatural: they could fly through the air to the magic walnut tree of Benevento, transform into animals, enter homes through the keyhole, steal milk from nursing mothers, suck the blood of living things, and paralyze their victims in their sleep. At times, the popular imagination conflated the witches of legend with local folk healers, leading to accusations of witchcraft.

The folk beliefs and practices of Italian Americans met with immense hostility from the dominant American culture. The representatives of the dominant culture, in the form of doctors, social workers, educators, and the Irish-dominated American Catholic clergy, stigmatized them as signs of ignorance, backwardness and superstition, and decried the strength with which Italian Americans clung to them. Instead of being a source of pride

and status within the community, folk magical practice became increasingly stigmatized, a source of shame. Practitioners began to hide their actions from outsiders, and eventually from family members, as well.

Early 20th century scholarly studies of popular traditions contributed to their stigmatization in the dominant culture. One fashionable theory of the time interpreted folklore as “survivals” of an earlier stage in the allegedly unilinear evolution of human culture. According to this hypothesis, customs and traditions that appeared irrational or inexplicable were in fact the detritus of “savage” or “barbarian” stages in human development. As populations became educated and evolved, survivals would disappear and be replaced by more scientific understandings. The doctrine of survivals was first developed by Edward B. Tylor, and was applied to Italian folklore by early Italian ethnographers, who interpreted many customs as vestiges of ancient Classical civilizations, at the same time that they compared them to the habits of indigenous peoples from Africa, the Americas and Polynesia, with whom anthropologists were just becoming familiar. These theories were enthusiastically adopted by American educators, social workers and clergymen struggling to understand unfamiliar Italian American folkways. For example, social worker Phyllis H. Williams wrote: “The religious practices of the South Italians preserved in modified form many elements ... associated with ancient Greek, Roman and Mohammedan beliefs” (1938:135). She argued that saints were actually “folk substitutes for the old Greek and Roman gods and spirits of the woods and rivers.... The polytheism of the old departmental deities survived in the veneration of local saints” (1938:136). It was just a short step from the claims of the

American Catholic clergy that Italian American Catholics were not Christians at all, but heathens practicing paganism.

While survivalists intended to account for unfamiliar practices, their interpretations ultimately disenfranchised Italian Americans even further. They gave the practices a Romantic origin, but ignored their important role in the social and economic lives of Italian agriculturalists and Italian American immigrants. An Italian American commentator of the time remarked: “These ethnic survivals cause us to be laughed at, even disdained, exposed to the sarcasm of the Americans” (Bernardy, 1914, quoted in Vecoli, 1969:233).

Despite this social stigma, many Italian folk magical and religious practices did not die out. Patronal feasts remain one of the liveliest, most vivid expressions of popular religiosity in the cities of the American East Coast, but folklorists continued to document magical practices well into the 1970’s. Many Italian Americans remember a *nonna* (grandmother) who could remove the evil eye, cure common ailments with charms and prayers, or purify the house with salt. Often, though, the younger American-born generations adopted the view of the dominant culture that traditional practices were superstitious nonsense. The term *strega* was sometimes used disparagingly by family members to refer to the bearers of these traditions.

By the 1980’s, researchers began to notice that some customs had fallen into disuse, while others remained largely as expressions of ethnic pride, rather than elements of belief. Folklorists Bill Clements and Frances Malpezzi noted, for example, that the bright red horns which had once been ubiquitous amulets against the evil eye were now displayed on the rear view mirrors of cars as symbols of ethnic identity (1992:131). Even

when Italian Americans continued their traditional religious practices, it was clear that by the late 20th century, these existed in a context very different from that of the small towns and villages where they had originated. The socio-economic transformations of the 20th century combined with the stigmatization of traditional practices to form a veil of secrecy and mystery around them. For many second-, third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans, the word “strega” and the traditions surrounding it became little more than whispers in family legends – decontextualized, marginalized, silenced, but still powerful fodder for the imagination. They were, in short, ripe for revival.

The Emergence of Stregheria and the Politics of Ethnicity

The revival, reclamation and invention of tradition always emerges within a particular historical, cultural and political context in which it serves a specific function for the group involved. Stregheria is no exception to this rule. For Italian Americans in the early 21st century, it serves three identifiable roles: it provides a way of connecting with an ethnic identity free from the constraints of the ethnic or religious community; it re-values spiritual experiences and practices de-valued by the dominant discourse; and it addresses the changing role of Italian Americans vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the shifting political landscape of the late 20th century.

For most of the 20th century, Italian American ethnic identity did not exist apart from Italian American ethnic communities. Especially in the cities of the Eastern seaboard, Italian Americans originally settled in neighborhoods populated by other Italian Americans – often, people from the same regions and villages as the newer immigrants. These neighborhoods, known as “Little Italies,” grew into communities that provided everything the immigrants needed to survive in the new cultural environment: from shops

that furnished ingredients necessary for Italian cooking, to mutual aid societies upon which immigrants could turn in cases of financial or personal setbacks. The local Catholic church was also an important part of the community, bringing its members together regularly for worship, enforcing morality, and providing additional opportunities for community collaboration through festival organizing committees, religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and other para-religious associations. In these ethnic communities, identity was a matter of belonging to a family, a neighborhood, a church. But by the late 20th century, many Little Italies had changed considerably as Italian Americans moved up the socio-economic ladder and into the suburbs, while new immigrant groups occupied territories once considered exclusively Italian American. In the suburbs, Italian Americans increasingly associated and intermarried with other ethnic groups. Allegiances to the old neighborhood became attenuated, and even church attendance decreased. For many young Italian Americans growing up apart from neighborhood ethnic and religious communities, identity is no longer tied up with these structures. Some actively reject the old ethnic communities as too restrictive of individual freedoms. For young women, especially, the sexual restrictions that characterized family, neighborhood and religious communities were perceived as forces of oppression. During the 1970s, 80s and 90s, many Italian Americans distanced themselves from these associations as they searched for identities grounded in individuality, rather than in belonging to a group.

Yet this process also left a vacuum when it came to ethnic identity formation. Italian Americans who had grown up apart from ethnic communities, or who had intentionally distanced themselves from them in search of more individualistic options,

began to search for a way to be ethnic without the restrictions on individuality imposed by the small-group dynamics of neighborhood, church and ethnic communities. They wanted an Italian American identity free from the associations and constraints of Little Italies. Some yearned for a spirituality that would still connect them with their roots without the behavioral and moral conservatism of the Catholic Church. For these seekers, Stregheria offers a powerful brew.

Like other forms of Neopaganism, Stregheria is a framework for the practice of magic and ecstatic states. The folk Catholicism of Italian American immigrants provided plenty of contexts for the individual to experience direct contact with the sacred and a personal relationship with spiritual beings, including the Virgin Mary and the saints. But these expressions made Italian Americans subjects of scorn among the dominant culture, including Catholic officials in America, whose own traditions reflected a different cultural background. They branded Italian Americans as pagans and heathen – backwards, ignorant folk whose practices were signs of a less evolved stage of human development, according to the racist theories of the late 19th century. Stregheria represents a reclamation of these terms and a re-valuing of the spiritual traditions that were so disdained by the dominant culture in the past. It provides a way for Italian Americans to reconnect with the spiritual practices of their grandparents and great-grandparents. When these traditions of religious ecstasy and vernacular healing have been lost or forgotten, Stregheria provides new traditions to replace them, and a new framework in which to understand them. Instead of being evidence of ignorance, they become links to a complex system of occult philosophy and ancient learning; rather than being irrational superstitions, they are regarded as a form of peasant resistance. Italian

American Streghe can interpret almost any form of folklore in their families as signs they are heirs to an ancient, noble pagan religion – one the Church helped to destroy.

This becomes particularly significant against the backdrop of identity politics that emerged in late 20th century North America. During the first half of the 20th century, ethnic politics were dominated by assimilationist paradigms: immigrants were supposed to gradually give up their old ways and adopt the language, customs and beliefs of the dominant Anglo-American culture. But as a result of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, this model began to change. By the 1970's, a new multicultural model of ethnic identity emerged, popularly known as the “salad bowl,” in contrast to the earlier “melting pot” paradigm. According to the new model, each ethnic group maintained elements of distinctiveness, contributing to the “flavor” of the larger society. The Civil Rights movement also introduced a new mechanism for the creation of identity: because African Americans, Native Americans and others who struggled for civil rights suffered horrible injustice at the hands of the dominant culture, discrimination and victimization became part of the mechanism for claiming a legitimate identity.

Italian Americans found themselves caught in the middle of these shifting political sands. Most had arrived in North America at the time when the dominant paradigm emphasized the importance of assimilation, blending or fitting in with the dominant culture. This led them to shed or hide the practices that made them objects of discrimination. In order to distance themselves from their peasant roots, Italian Americans tended to align themselves with Italian high culture, lionizing great historical figures such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo and organizing Columbus Day celebrations as markers of Italian ethnic pride. But by the 1990's, this strategy

consistently backfired. Christopher Columbus was no longer regarded as a great figure for his “discovery” of America, but as an evil colonizer who brought disease and destruction to peaceful indigenous societies. Columbus Day parades were criticized as expressions of white imperialism. While in the early 20th century, there was much discussion as to whether Italian Americans could even be considered white, by the late 20th century, they had become subsumed into a larger category of dominant white culture, in contrast with minorities of color (African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans). This had happened largely because Italian Americans had begun moving into the middle classes in much larger numbers. By the late 20th century, they were no longer living in isolated ethnic neighborhoods, but had become fully integrated into mainstream American society, sometimes occupying positions of significant authority. American political discourse tends to use ethnicity to address issues of class. Middle-class white Americans are often perceived as lacking any kind of ethnic distinctiveness or cultural difference. In gaining economic and political clout, Italian Americans lost the badge of authenticity that had earlier provided them with a sense of ethnic identity.

In this new political climate, some Italian Americans felt they were targets of criticism from all sides. Many remembered having been the objects of prejudice and discrimination well into the 1970’s and 80’s because of their cultural differences. But by the 1990’s, they were perceived as white oppressors by newer minority groups. The new paradigm of victimology led European Americans to engage in new forms of Italian-bashing: Raven Grimassi recounted how he began to explore his own ethnic magical traditions after some Celtic Witches, who perceived Italian Americans as the descendants of imperial Romans, blamed him for the destruction of the druid religion of Britain and

Gaul. Thus Italian Americans became caught in the squall of identity politics: subsumed into the category of the dominant culture by newer minorities, but still the objects of prejudice from other European Americans, who either continued earlier traditions of anti-Italian bias, or found reasons to discriminate based on new ideologies and historical understandings.

Like Wicca and other forms of Neopaganism in North America, Stregheria creates identity by aligning its practitioners with the folk cultures of Europe. And like oppressed indigenes of the New World, Old World peasants were themselves oppressed by the forces of church and state. Stregheria uses folk culture as a marker of spiritual authenticity in a political climate where identity claims are more legitimate if groups align themselves with the marginalized and oppressed. It creates an illustrious pedigree for folk traditions, at the same time it disassociates them from the imperial heritage of Rome and Catholicism.

Stregheria also allows Italian Americans to reclaim and recast negative stereotypes in a more positive light. Thus Martello turns the mob into a secret religious society that continued the veneration of Demeter and Persephone; Grimassi transforms the epithets of “witch,” “pagan” and “heathen” from signs of shame into evidence of spiritual teachings that survived millennia. Through this process, folk magical practices are transformed into sources of ethnic pride and distinctiveness, and create new ways for Italian Americans to imagine themselves. This is valuable in two ways: it provides a new paradigm in the creation of ethnic identity in a homogenizing mass culture, and it may actually help preserve certain traditions which otherwise might have disappeared.

At the same time, it is important to note that while Stregheria appears to create solidarity with the experiences of Italian peasants and immigrants to North America, it is a far cry from their cultures. Few Streghe have traveled to Italy, and of those, even fewer have actually visited rural villages where traditions of vernacular magic can still be found. Many Streghe, Grimassi included, do not speak, read or write Italian, and are relatively uninformed about Italian history. Not all Streghe are of Italian descent; those who are, are often several generations removed from the immigrant experience. Perhaps as a result of this lack of direct contact with Italian culture, Stregheria tends to romanticize Italian peasant culture. Its image of rural Italian life has more in common with an Olive Garden commercial than with lived experience. It portrays Italian peasants as living in a land of plenty in harmony with nature, whereas the Italian peasant experience was generally one of hunger, poverty and privation. It also removes the Christian element from Italian and Italian American folkways, distorting their context and meaning in a way that renders them unrecognizable to their actual practitioners. In its own way, Stregheria repeats the pattern of earlier generations of Italian Americans who created identities by emphasizing the legacy of the elite, only now, Aradia di Toscano and Giordano Bruno have taken the place of Christopher Columbus and Leonardo Da Vinci. It also reproduces the Italian prejudice against southern Italy by portraying its origins as Tuscan, Etruscan and thus indigenous to the north or center.

At root, this contradiction is about the ambivalence Americans feel around issues of ethnicity. Many Americans would like to enjoy what they imagine as the benefits of belonging to an ethnic community: the warmth of a ready-made extended family, a feeling of being part of something greater than oneself, a connection to a noble heritage,

and of course, colorful folk customs. But few want to experience the limitations on personal freedom that accompany life in the confines of a small group, and even fewer the prejudice, discrimination and poverty that are often part of the American ethnic experience. More to the point, because American discourses of ethnicity and class are inextricably intertwined, many Americans feel tremendous ambivalence about ethnicity: they want the feeling of belonging to an ethnic group without the inconvenience of belonging to the lower classes. Many positive representations of ethnicity are thus stripped of their class markers: sanitized, commodified and rendered non-threatening to a white middle-class audience. In this, Stregheria is not different from other ethnic varieties of Neopagan Witchcraft, or, for that matter, from other positive public representations of ethnicity.

Stregheria Today

It is difficult to estimate the number of Streghe practicing in North America today. As with all Neopagan religions, self-reporting can be unreliable because many practitioners keep their religions secret due to discrimination, prejudice and misunderstanding in mainstream culture. Also, because Pagans and Witches typically belong simultaneously to a number of different traditions, counting the members of each individual tradition and group can lead to inflated estimates, since membership overlaps considerably. Nevertheless, in the larger landscape of revival Witchcraft, Streghe constitute a minority. The number of initiated Streghe descending from either the Triancrian Rose Coven in New York or from Grimassi's coven in California is probably quite small, along the order of 200 individuals. However, Grimassi's books sell approximately 60,000 copies apiece, indicating that there may be many more who either

identify as Streghe, or who maintain an interest in ethnic varieties of Witchcraft. While many Streghe are of Italian American descent, the religion admits members from any ethnic group if they demonstrate a sincere interest. Grimassi has developed an adoption ritual that is used to welcome non-Italian American members into his group, but not all Strega covens practice it.

The legal status of Streghe depends upon the larger national networking organizations to which individual practitioners and groups belong. Several Pagan networks, such as Covenant of the Goddess and Pagan Spirit Alliance, offer their member groups legal status as religions, as well as certification of religious specialists, tax exempt status and legal advice and protection in cases of discrimination. Streghe who join these organizations receive the full benefits of membership. Unaffiliated Streghe may not have the same protection. While Wicca and revival Witchcraft are now better known to the dominant culture, Stregheria is still relatively unfamiliar outside the Neopagan movement. For this reason, as well, there are few if any popular representations of Streghe by the American mass media and popular culture. Most popular representations of modern Witches tend to focus on Wicca, rather than its more esoteric ethnic variants.

Popular representations of witches in Italian culture are sometimes enthusiastically adopted by Italian American Streghe, who see them as validation of their traditions and sometimes adopt them as personal symbols. Two of the most prevalent are the Befana, a good witch who flies through the air on her broom, delivering toys and goodies to children on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, and the liqueur “Strega.” The liqueur is flavored with walnuts, and its name is a reference to the folkloric walnut tree of Benevento, the legendary gathering place of witches in Italian folklore. Italian

American Streghe sometimes display bottles of the liqueur and objects decorated with the Befana in their homes as signs of their ethnic and religious affiliation.

While Wicca has made some inroads in Italy, especially in urban areas, it is still relatively invisible to the majority culture. However, judging from one Internet site, some American Streghe have contacted Italian magical groups seeking additional information on Italian magical traditions. The Internet site <http://www.streghe.cc/>, of the “Associazione Culturale Hermes e Afrodite” (Cultural Society of Hermes and Aphrodite), a group dedicated to magical practice and esoteric teachings, has a link for American Witches to follow that leads to a page that reads, in part:

If you are a USA Wiccan and you read our site, you will get a strange Impression of us. A lot of people come to our site and say "what's wrong here?" Someone tried to teach us the meaning of some Italian words..:-:))) [sic] This is because there are a LOT of differences between USA Witches and Italian Witches. These differences are due to the different history, the different traditions, and different beliefs. There is another thing: you tend to consider the USA way to Italian Witchcraft as the "Original Old Italian Way". It is NOT. [...]

"but Raven Grimassi said..."

We read the Raven Grimassi books. We were interested, we find it interesting, but we concluded that if you want to know Italian Country you should step foot in Italy at least once. [...] We NEVER heard words like "Tanarra, Janarra and Fanarra", and we never knew that Italy was divided in 3 clans...[elipses in original] we can count almost 180-200 different dialects in Italy and each dialect has its own spells, beliefs, traditions, and clans in that country. Perhaps, Italy was dominated, divided and divided again in a lot of conqueror's zones, and that introduced a kind cultural difference, due to the obvious communication difficulties between each conquered zone, often found in war. So, "Tanarra , Janarra and Fanarra" were never three clans of witches that divided all of Italy, as he said.

Last but not least, we never heard any of the rites and spells he proposed on [sic] his book...we found some right words but nothing equal to what we do here.....[elipses in original]

We see that Grimassi is very popular with 2nd or 3rd generation Italian-Americans that want to discover their Italian Roots, but we think his work is a little "how USA People see Italian guys : pizza, pasta, Mafia and some other common word". (Sophia Loren is not any kind of Witch, ok?) But, we don't hate Grimassi books, we only ask that you to call it "the USA look to the Italian path", and NOT, as you are doing, "The Only Original True Ancient Italian Way".....call it by its correct name, and we will be very, very friendly with you. (<http://www.streghe.cc/>, last consulted 2/17/04).

The authors of the website also explain several other important differences that separate Italian magical groups from their American counterparts. One is the absence of the Wiccan Rede, or guiding ethical principle, "An it harm none, do as you will." While a few Italian groups have now adopted it into their traditions, it is not a part of traditional Italian magical practice. Secondly, the Cultural Association of Hermes and Aphrodite describes sex as a central to their practice, and calls American magical groups for whom this is anathema "puritanical." A third difference cited is the tendency of American magical groups to eclectically combine concepts from a variety of world religions and magical traditions – for example, the use of concepts such as karma, tantra and psychology within a Wiccan ritual context. Finally, the authors of the site decry American "political correctness" and the open-minded tolerance of other religions which is typical of most American Neopagan groups. Citing the omnipresence and persecution of the Catholic Church, the Cultural Association of Hermes and Aphrodite expresses its need to protect itself through secrecy and exclusivity. (<http://www.streghe.cc/>, last consulted 2/17/04).

While this is a single website that represents only one association of Italian magical groups, it is also the only one to address the issue of Italian American Witchcraft as seen by Italians. Presumably, other Italian magical groups are either unaware of Stregheria, or have chosen not to publish their impressions of it on their websites.

The Future of Stregheria

It is difficult to predict what road Stregheria will take in the future. In *Italian Witchcraft* (2000), Grimassi presents a prophecy that Aradia allegedly made during the 13th century when she descended to earth to bring back the Old Religion. According to the prophecy, the age of Christian domination will be followed by the “Age of the Daughter,” a time when “there shall be an awakening in the awareness of women, and their wills shall be asserted. Laws will change and women shall walk in the ways of men” (Grimassi, 2000:269). This time will be followed by a period of violent upheavals, until “out of the ashes shall arise a new world of reason. People shall no longer be ruled by governments. Nor shall any one people oppress another. There shall be no rulers, but only teachers and counselors. No one shall possess power over another, nor shall anyone restrict or control any other person. The Earth shall be of one people, and they shall live under the emanating rays of love, peace and reason” (Grimassi, 2000:269-70). The arrival of this time will be heralded by a new prophet, whose birth will coincide with the repeal of the last anti-witchcraft laws. Perhaps this is intended to imply that Grimassi is that prophet, since England repealed its last witchcraft laws in 1951, the year of his birth. In this vision, Aradia’s teachings play a central role in the enlightenment of humankind and the arrival of a new Golden Age.

This vision is, however, somewhat improbable. More likely, Stregheria will continue to expand as long as Grimassi continues to promote it, and as long as people are inspired by his writings. Its interpretation of Italian folk magic as an ancient pagan religion may even take root more broadly among Italian Americans. However, esoteric mystery religions seldom become forces in the transformation of human history, because

by their very nature they are secret and exclusive. Stregheria and indeed all of American Neopaganism would have to change considerably in order to achieve the cultural transformation described in Grimassi's prophecy of Aradia.

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Electronic Resources

<http://www.ravengrimassi.com/> Home page of Raven Grimassi, author and creator of Stregheria

<http://www.stregheria.com/> Home page of Raven Grimassi's Stregheria

<http://www.fabrisia.com/> Home page of Fabrisia's Boschetto, operated by Fabrisia, an Italian American practitioner of Stregheria

<http://www.strega.net/> Large site on Aradia and Stregheria

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/7159/strega.html> Website maintained by Pandora, one practitioner of Stregheria

<http://www.lucedistrega.net/> Home page of Luce di Strega, an Italian Neopagan Witchcraft organization (in Italian)

<http://www.streghe.cc/>, Website of the Associazione Culturale Hermes e Afrodite (Cultural Society of Hermes and Aphrodite), an Italian society for the practice of esoteric ritual magic

<http://www.strega.it/eng/index.html> Alberti Products Website (makers of the liqueur "Strega")